

Line, WeChat: Asian social networks move to conquer Europe

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Move aside Facebook and Skype. Asian social networks, already hugely popular on their continent, have set their sights on Europe where they could prove stiff competition for their US rivals.

China's WeChat and Japan's Line, which let users make [free calls](#), send instant messages and post funny short videos and photos, take attributes from Facebook, Skype and messaging application WhatsApp and roll them all together.

This week, Line executives travelled to France and Italy for a public relations offensive aimed at raising awareness of the mobile app, which already counts some 230 million users around the world including 47 million in Japan alone.

The social network has already taken root in other parts of Europe.

In Spain, for instance, Line has forged heavyweight partnerships with football clubs FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, brands such as Coca-Cola or tennis star Rafael Nadal.

FC Barcelona, for instance, has a home page on the app where it posts photos that has already drawn more than 8.2 million friends.

Line even has a permanent office in Spain, where it counts some 15 million users already.

A French version of the mobile app, meanwhile, is to be launched before the end of the year.

One of the main selling points for Line, which was launched at the beginning of 2011, is its "stickers"—funny, cartoon-like figures that express emotions in a way deemed far more original and fun than traditional emoticons.

On WeChat, users can post figures that move about dancing, blowing kisses or punching the air. Both social networks also supply a selection of "stickers" that users have to pay for.

"We're betting a lot on this new form of communication with stickers," Sunny Kim, assistant director general of Line Europe and America, told AFP on a trip to Paris.

This part of the business represents 30 percent of Line's overall turnover and in July alone, users bought eight million euros (\$10.8 million) worth of stickers.

The company makes the rest of its money on the sale of games integrated in the [mobile app](#) (50 percent) and from partnerships and products on the side.

Line's logo is green with a conversation bubble inside, and looks remarkably similar to the icon of WeChat, which began in January 2011.

Already translated into 19 languages, the social network has 500 million users, including 100 million outside of China, and plans to launch in France towards the end of the year.

While Line has Real Madrid, WeChat has enrolled the help of Argentinian football star Lionel Messi, who has become ambassador of

the brand and has filmed a commercial for the social network.

But WeChat—which belongs to China's web giant Tencent—is also banking on the huge Chinese diaspora to expand.

"The French of Chinese origin or the Canadians of Chinese origin, for instance, are the bridge between China and the rest of the world," said Renaud Edouard-Baraud, who heads up an Asia consulting branch of the BNP-Paribas bank and advises WeChat.

Many brands keen to tap into the giant China market also have a presence on WeChat.

Companies can for instance use geolocalisation to pinpoint the exact location of Chinese users when they are visiting Europe, and send them promotional offers to lure them into their shops.

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